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ABSTRACT

Adult education programs must increasingly serve non-native speakers of English, many of whom are neither literate in their native language nor in English. It is suggested that first language literacy promotes second language acquisition and that literacy skills in the native language are likely to transfer to the second language. This digest defines the central cognitive and psycholinguistic tenets inherent in the native language literacy approach and provides, social, cultural, and political justification for the approach. Instructional delivery models for initial literacy and other literacy program models are described. It is concluded that more research on the results of the different approaches to teaching English-as-a-Second-Language literacy skills is needed. Such research should consider not only the pedagogical and linguistic factors involved in the education of adults, but also the social and political implications of bilingualism and biliteracy with regard to equal opportunities and full participation in society. (Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse on Literacy Education) (LET)

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DEVELOPING NATIVE LANGUAGE LITERACY IN LANGUAGE MINORITY ADULTS

ERIC Digest
National Clearinghouse on Literacy Education

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National Clearinghouse on Literacy Education

Developing Native Language Literacy in Language Minority Adults

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Increasingly, adult education programs need to serve students whose native language is not English. Some of these students are already literate in their native language, and their only need is to learn both oral and written English as a second language (ESL). Others are not literate in their native language, and therefore may need to acquire literacy skills both in their mother tongue and in English. Research evidence suggests that first language literacy promotes second language acquisition, and that literacy skills in the native language are likely to transfer to the second language (Rivera, 1988).

Cognitive Aspects of Native Language Literacy

A fundamental assumption in the schooling of language minority children is that skills and knowledge learned in the native language transfer to English. This transfer is referred to as the cross-language transfer of skills and knowledge. Based on this assumption, Cummins (1983, 1986) has formulated two hypotheses pertinent to native language literacy.

First, the Interdependency Hypothesis states that "to the extent that instruction through a minority language is effective in developing academic proficiency in the minority language, transfer of this proficiency to the majority language will occur given adequate exposure and motivation to learn the majority language" (Cummins, 1986). In other words, language skills, once learned, transfer globally from one language to another. Second, the Common Underlying Proficiency Hypothesis holds that the development of first language reading skills provides a deep conceptual and linguistic proficiency that is strongly related to the development of literacy and general academic skills in the second language. This common underlying proficiency makes possible the transfer of cognitive and academic or literacy-related skills across languages (Cummins, 1983).

When adults are taught to read in the language they already know, they can use the linguistic strengths they bring into the program and draw upon the knowledge and skills they have acquired in their first language (Rivera, 1988). This approach is consonant with one of the underlying tenets of adult education: New skills and knowledge are best acquired when they build on the already existing knowledge and skills of the adult learner. Ovando and Collier (1985) state that even when two languages use different writing systems, readers are able to apply the visual, linguistic, and cognitive strategies they use in their first language to reading in the second language. Students transfer what they know about reading in one language to the other, and in so doing maximize the linguistic strengths they already possess.

Sociocultural Aspects of Native Language Literacy

In addition to the cognitive and psycholinguistic tenets central to the native language literacy approach, there are social, cultural, and political concerns that argue for native language literacy development. According to Giroux's (1987) definition of literacy, to be literate is to be present and active in the struggle to reclaim one's voice and history, and to move into the future confidently. Language carries the conception of the world to the group that speaks it; language does not merely reflect reality but plays an active role in the construction of reality. The students' native languages should be actively incorporated in the educational process. The use of the native language allows learners to discuss their current life experiences using their own words. It also allows them to retain ties to their culture and past as, for example, when they write home to the people they have left behind.

Instructional Delivery Models for Initial Literacy

The most commonly followed model in adult education for language minority groups in the United States focuses on ESL, with little or no development of non-English mother tongues. These programs may include adults who have completed little formal education in their native language as well as adults who can read and write in their own languages.

Some programs are not able to offer native language literacy instruction because the students speak a number of native languages, making it economically unfeasible to offer literacy classes in each non-English native language. In other cases, programs do not see the immediate benefits of devoting time to instruction in the first language because they do not perceive literacy in the native language as a viable solution for students' survival while in the United States. They may see the acquisition of spoken English proficiency as the sole factor to have immediate social and economic benefits in the community, regardless of literacy ability in either language.

While they may not teach in the native languages of their students, some ESL literacy programs employ bilingual (or multilingual) personnel in a variety of capacities, including in-take counselors and teachers' aides. Bilingual personnel—who are frequently members of the same national, ethnic, or linguistic groups as the students—may help ESL teachers in and out of the classroom as translators, tutors of individuals and small groups, and sources of cultural information for teachers to incorporate into ESL literacy lessons.

Programs that provide native language literacy instruction differ in their structure and design. To varying extents, different

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program designs reflect learner preferences, political beliefs, various theories about literacy acquisition, and pragmatic concerns such as the existence of a written alphabet for the native language, and the availability of instructional materials, trained teachers, and program funding.

Most programs that offer native language literacy have bilingualism and biliteracy as a goal. Some require that students wanting to enroll in English as a second language classes demonstrate some threshold level of literacy ability in their native language before receiving ESL instruction. In this approach, students who are not literate in their native language take a course or a series of courses to develop basic literacy skills in the native language before starting the ESL sequence.

In other programs, ESL and native language classes are taken separately during the same enrollment session. In this approach, ESL classes typically focus on developing students' oral/aural proficiency, while reading and writing abilities are developed in the native language. ESL and literacy classes are often held on alternate days, are taught by different instructors, and may or may not cover the same thematic content.

Some programs offer special bilingual literacy classes, where students develop their reading and writing skills simultaneously in their native language and in English. Such classes are either team taught by a native language speaker and an English speaker, or by one bilingual teacher, and typically cover similar content in both the native language and English. This model is akin to what has sometimes been referred to as the "concurrent approach" to bilingual education for children (Ovando & Collier, 1985).

Bilingual programs are often initiated by community-based organizations that seek to promote the maintenance of the cultural identity of a given language minority community. These programs often encourage cultural transmission activities such as documenting life stories from the native culture and writing letters to family members from the home countries, activities that help to inculcate a sense of history and pride in younger generations. These life experiences, in turn, can serve as a powerful basis for developing the thematic content of the literacy curriculum.

Parents or grandparents may believe that unless they become literate in their native language, they will not be able to convince the young of the value of that language, and the family risks losing its cultural and linguistic roots and diversity. As Hakuta (1990) points out, "If the languages represented by American linguistic minorities were seen as a natural resource, such as species of birds or trees, there would be a public clamor to set up investigative commissions to monitor and prevent their rapid extinction."

Other Literacy Program Models

To an increasing extent, adult educators are taking note of the fact that in many adult education systems, the only course offerings available to limited English proficient adults consist of ESL or native language classes that teach initial literacy, whereas native English speaking students are able to take a wider range of basic skills courses in math, science, and social studies. Educators' experiences with the amnesty education program (see Terdy & Spener, 1990) have led some municipal and state education systems to consider providing LEP adults with content courses in their native language. Where they are offered (in New York City and Los Angeles, for example), such courses fall under the rubric of what has been termed BENL (Basic Education in the Native Language) or BABE (Bilingual Adult Basic Education). Beyond the level of adult basic education, it is possible in many cities to take the test of General Educational Development (GED) in Spanish, and it is not uncommon for adult education programs serving limited English speakers to offer GED preparation courses in Spanish.

Bilingual Vocational Training (BVT) programs are another example of a program design that may provide some literacy instruction in the adult's native language. The BVT model calls for use of the native language to teach vocational skills associated with a given occupation. This instruction in the native language (or in English with bilingual support) is coupled with special vocational ESL (VESL) classes, which develop the English skills needed to competently carry out the duties of a particular occupation.

Conclusion

In view of the large and increasing immigrant population in the United States in need of literacy and English as a second language services, more research on the results of the different approaches available must be conducted. This research should take into consideration not only the pedagogical and linguistic factors involved in the education of adults, but also the social and political implications of bilingualism and biliteracy with regard to equal opportunities and full participation in society.

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